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SUBJECT: PRESS REACTION: DELAY IN LIBYAN CASE EVOKES MIXED REACTION IN BULGARIA

1. (U) SUMMARY: The November 15 decision by the Libyan Supreme Court to postpone judgment on the case of five Bulgarian medics until January 31st 2006, has provoked a mixed reaction in Bulgaria. Government leaders, while relieved at having averted confirmation of the death sentences, have voiced concerns that the new delay will prolong the suffering of the five innocent nurses. Bulgarian officials note that the postponement allows for more time to continue efforts at securing the medics' release. Bulgarian media coverage on the decision has been extensive, including widespread coverage of the clashes between angry Libyans and riot police outside the courtroom in Tripoli. Some editorials are expressing hope that the West will help to work out a behind-the-scene deal for the Bulgarian medics' release. END SUMMARY.

PURVANOV: DECISION ONLY PROLONGS NURSES' FATE

2. (U) Bulgarian politicians were swift to react to the Libyan court's decision. President Purvanov said in a statement that the court was expected to deliver the only possible decision---an acquittal. "A thorough analysis of the evidence in the case, made by European, Bulgarian and Arab legal experts, proves that the evidence contains nothing to confirm the guilt of the Bulgarian medics," remarked the President. Purvanov added the "Libyan Supreme Court decision is prolonging the drama of the innocent Bulgarian medics." He expressed hope that "this postponement would be the last and that a fair resolution will be achieved." The President thanked Bulgaria's friends and partners for their support, and said that "efforts should continue to reach an agreement with the Libyan authorities that would allow that innocent nurses return back home". The media highlighted Purvanov's personal message to the five nurses, assuring them that "Bulgaria will not spare any effort to ensure a favorable outcome of this painful trial."

BULGARIA STEADFAST IN ITS POSITION

3. (U) The Bulgarian government echoed Purvanov's message and said the relevant institutions would continue to press for a favorable resolution to the case. Foreign Ministry spokesman Dimitar Tsanchev said Bulgaria hoped the delay would give the court an opportunity to further consider the indisputable evidence of the nurses' innocence. Like Purvanov, Tsanchev underscored the government's growing concern for the nurses' welfare, saying that the postponement tested the limits of the nurses' physical and emotional endurance. Tsanchev maintained that there would be no change in Bulgaria's official position of refusing to accept Libyan demands for payment in exchange for the nurses' release. "Any payments, compensations or other forms that imply acknowledgement of guilt are unacceptable for Bulgaria," Tsanchev added. According to the spokesman, "Bulgarian authorities will continue to work towards securing a maximum level of international support for the medics."

4. (U) Other politicians also expressed concern over the nurses' current health. Former President and current Chairman of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) party Petar Stoyanov said Bulgaria should demand a change in the conditions under which the nurses are being held, which he described as "appalling." Rather than being kept in custody, Stoyanov argued that the nurses should be released on bail. Stoyanov sees the nurses release on bail as a key step that could relieve some of the pressure built up around the case.

HIV CASE PART OF A "COMPLEX LIBYAN PUZZLE"

5. (U) The ruling Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) expressed its disappointment and alarm with the decision. "The Bulgarian medics are becoming hostages and part of the complex Libyan puzzle, they are means which Libya is using to solve its domestic and foreign policy problems," BSP spokesman Angel Naidenov said. "The adjournment of the case allows the Libyan regime to continue the political haggling with the international community and Bulgaria in a bid to derive certain economic and political dividends from the fate of the Bulgarian medics," said MP Konstantin Dimitrov from the center-right Democrats for Strong Bulgaria. "At the same time, Bulgaria is getting an extra chance to broaden international support, including through joint action between Sofia, Brussels and Washington," Dimitrov added. Defense lawyers of the nurses saw the delay as a positive sign, saying new appeals meant new chances for the defense to prove the medics' innocence.

16. (U) The court's decision received widespread media coverage with the clashes between the angered relatives of the infected children and police figuring prominently in the headlines. Bulgaria's largest circulation daily Trud published a photo of one of the parents of Libyan children protesting outside the court and quoting a mother as calling "on Al Qaeda to launch revenge against the Bulgarians." Another parent was quoted by "Trud" as saying that he "will become a soldier of Al Qaeda and kidnap any Bulgarian, working in Libya."

17. (U) Some editorials were optimistic that a delay in the court's decision would lead to the nurses' release. An editorial in "24 Chasa" daily said that even though the next 76 days will be painful for the nurses and Bulgarian society, the delay allowed extra time for vigorous efforts to secure the nurses' release. An editorial in "Standart" daily says that "to expect an acquittal for the nurses and the Palestinian doctor is now out of the question. Hopefully, the West could pay for the nurses' release because the U.S., UK and France negotiated with Tripoli on the Lockerbie, La Belle and UTA plane. The truth no longer matter, interests do," Standart said.  
BEYRLE